

“Before Abraham was born ... I am”

Sunday: 18th July 2010

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Readings:

Hebrews 11: 8-16

Psalm 8

John 8:48-59

It is fair to say that Abraham stands as the all-time hero of believing Jews, because his call by God from life in obscurity to a new adventure with God marks the very beginning of the Lord calling out a special people for himself ... the chosen people through whom God would work out his purposes through history, for all of creation.

Abraham's story is a long one ... and to study it in detail we would need to go right back to Genesis ... the first book of the Bible. Following the creation accounts in Chapters 1 and 2, and the fall of man from friendship with God to sinful disobedience in Chapter 3, we have the story of Noah in Chapters 6 to 9 and the Tower of Babel in Chapter 11.

Fast moving stuff!

It is an indication of Abraham's importance that the whole section of Genesis from Chapter 12 to 25 is about him – fourteen chapters which record the events of Abraham's life.

It all begins with God calling Abraham to leave behind everything he knew ... his home and family in Ur, which is in present day Iraq, and everything which was familiar to him ... and to go on an adventure with God to a new land ... and land which God himself would show him. God promised that there he would become the father of a great nation through which all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

The summary of Abraham's life which we read in Hebrews 11 shows how he did just that ... and is all the more remarkable for showing us that Abraham did it all by faith in the God that he was really only just beginning to get to know. So the writer to the Hebrews lays it out for us:

- By faith Abraham left his home at the age of seventy-five, to go to a place God promised him as his inheritance, even though he did not know where he was going.
- By faith Abraham left behind the relative sophistication of city life to live in tents in the desert in a relatively primitive foreign country, while looking forward to the fulfilment of God's promise that in the fullness of time he would experience something better.
- By faith Abraham came to be the father of Isaac, despite his own great age, and the fact that Sarah his wife was well past childbearing age and had always been considered to be barren.
- By faith Abraham was content to believe in what God would do through his descendants after his death, even though he knew he would not see God's promises fulfilled during his own lifetime.

- By faith Abraham was even willing to offer up his much-loved only son as a sacrifice, believing that God would raise him back to life again.

So Abraham is *the* great example of faith, revered not only by Jews and Christians, but also by Muslims, who also count themselves to be 'children of Abraham' ... the man who trusted God completely and in so doing became the father and founder of God's chosen people. Certainly the Jews of Jesus' time thought there could be no-one greater than he.

No surprise, then, that when Jesus appeared to be putting himself on a level with Abraham, the Jews said: "*Who do you think you are?*"

Now that's the question, isn't it? ... the question we've been asking over these last few weeks as we have looked at what Jesus said about himself, and what other people said about him.

"Who do you think you are?"

Various people referred to Jesus as:

"The Word made flesh" and "The Lamb of God", and even "Messiah".

Jesus himself said:

"I am the alpha and the omega"... "I am the first and the last" ... "I am the light of the world" and "I am the bread of life" ... and some others things we have yet to look at.

So what's going on in this passage in John 8?

Our passage this morning is part of a longer debate between Jesus and 'the Jews' ... which we can take as shorthand for some of the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law who were challenging him and asking questions of him. Earlier in the Chapter – in verse 39 – they had claimed: "*Abraham is our father*", to which Jesus had replied:

"If you were Abraham's children, then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things." (John 8: 39b - 40)

Jesus was saying that their behaviour indicated that far from being true children of Abraham, they were acting as children of the devil ... and in their desire to kill him, they were behaving true to form, since Satan was the father of lies, and a murderer from the beginning. They were unable to accept the truth as Jesus told it because, although they claimed to be God's representatives, they did not truly belong to God.

What the Pharisees and teachers of the Law were doing was to distort the truth to the point where they were actually *reversing* the truth, so they suggested that Jesus was demon-possessed ... and they took Jesus' words that "*if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death*" as the evidence for this. See verse 52 – 53:

"At this the Jews exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if anyone keeps your word, he will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?""

Jesus could have answered their question by saying that God gives life to the faithful departed ... a new life with him in the present, and a newly embodied life in the coming resurrection. But he doesn't leave it at that ... he goes on to make a much greater

claim.

In verses 54 - 56, Jesus is saying that the one true God is at work in him, and working through him ... and that Abraham himself, who trusted this one true God and believed in his promises for the future, had believed and rejoiced in the fact that he would see the day of Jesus, some two thousand years after his own time.

Abraham trusted that God's promise was true ... that through his family all the peoples of the earth would be blessed, and so he looked ahead to that day when Jesus would come and fulfil that promise. In other words, Jesus is claiming here that he is the fulfilment of God's promise which Abraham had believed all those years ago.

Remember that Jesus did not 'spring into being' at his birth in Bethlehem ... or even at his conception in Nazareth. John begins his gospel by reminding us that (John 1: 1 - 2):

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
He was with God in the beginning."*

So it is not fanciful for us to imagine Abraham meeting Jesus after he had died, and knowing that Jesus would be the fulfilment of the promise ... just as on the Mount of Transfiguration Moses and Elijah met with Jesus long after their deaths. We are not given the details of their encounter, but Jesus says in verse 56:

"Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

The Jews could not grasp this amazing truth, bound as they were and we are by the constraints of linear time. They did the maths, and they couldn't make sense of it:

"You are not yet fifty years old," they said to him, *"and you have seen Abraham!"*

Jesus' response connects us back to the very first of this series, when we looked at Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush at Mount Horeb, when God revealed his secret and holy name - YHWH - which means "I am".

The Jews who were speaking to Jesus could not have missed the connection or the meaning, when Jesus responded to their questions by saying (verse 58):

"I tell you the truth ... before Abraham was born, I am!"

Jesus was boldly declaring himself to be the Son of God ... "I am" ... the one who was present before the world began and who shared with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the work of creation ... the one who was before the beginning, and who will be until the end ... Alpha and Omega ... First and Last ... the God of Abraham, and the Lord of all..

We cannot take such a claim casually, because it is on the strength of who Jesus claims to be that we must either reject him as a charlatan or worship him as almighty God. There really is no middle path. Jesus cannot be accepted as just 'a great moral teacher' if he told such extravagant lies about who he is'.

There is no other way to understand Jesus ... he is either who he said he is, or else he is a dangerous madman or a wicked deceiver. Either he is our God and our King, or he is a fiend or a fruitcake. We should either walk away and forget about him, or we should bow down and worship him as our Saviour and our Lord.

The reaction of the crowd was predictable. To those who rejected him, Jesus' claim was the final straw ... they accused him of blasphemy and picked up stones to stone him, and they would have killed him there and then, except it was not the right time. Somehow Jesus slipped away ... we can only assume that the Father hid him from their sight.

But what about us? In our day, people accuse him of nonsense ... how can a person be both human and divine? ... how could Jesus have existed, thousands of years before he was born?

We have a choice to make, between believing him and rejecting him. But if he really is the God ... the same "I am" who met with Moses at Mount Horeb, and the one who has promised to return again at the end of the age ... then what will our response be?

If it is true ... surely it must change our thinking ... our attitudes ... our actions?

The truth about who Jesus is challenges us to have a faith like Abraham:

- who took God at his word and followed his call
- who give up everything in order to follow him
- who trusted in the promises of God
- and who was willing to lay down everything that was precious to him for God's sake.

The truth calls us to a faith which does something, because it recognises that God's purposes are more important than our own petty ambitions and half-baked plans.

If it is true, won't we say with the Psalmist:

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"?

.... and commit ourselves above all to a life of worship and prayer in which Jesus is central to everything we are, everything we do, and everything we long for?

If it is true, then surely he must be Lord of all ... of every aspect of our lives?